

Brigantine kicks off beach replenishment

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Press of Atlantic City

Published: Tuesday, February 7, 2006

Updated: Tuesday, February 7, 2006

— With earthmovers and backhoes as a backdrop, U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, and other dignitaries officially christened the city's \$4.5 million beach-replenishment project Monday.

But with the ceremony being held on the same day that President Bush sent a proposed \$2.77 trillion budget to Congress, LoBiondo knew that scaring up another \$3 million (the federal share of the project) for another area of southern New Jersey beach won't be easy.

"It's getting harder and harder to convince my colleagues in Congress to fund these projects," LoBiondo said. "It's a testament to the teamwork and dedication of everyone involved with this project that we are here today."

Although Bush's budget includes funds for rebuilding the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast and dredging of shipping routes, the administration has never funded coastal beach-replenishment projects. That has fallen to Congress, which has showed support for the work.

"It started under the Clinton administration, which tried to leave no money for beach replenishment, and it's continued under this administration," LoBiondo said. "Ultimately, the dollars needed for these projects are getting tougher to secure, and with the situation on the Gulf Coast, it's just that much harder. Fortunately, most of the replenishment projects in this area are already started and the commitments for maintenance are there.

"Of course that doesn't mean the funding is there, but with the project already started and the commitment made, the funding can be secured," LoBiondo said. "But I'd hate to have a project right now that was still in the engineering phase and just starting. That funding will be much less secure."

In fact, LoBiondo said that the Brigantine project came in just under the wire. Technically, money for the project was included in last year's federal budget, as the project was delayed about six months. Part of that delay was caused because the dredger being used for the project was tied up with other projects in Florida.

"Obviously we've had hurricanes before and we've still secured funding," LoBiondo said. "But it is getting more challenging."

Mayor Phil Guenther said that planning for the local project and securing the funds took nearly 10 years of work. But Guenther and LoBiondo said the benefits of such projects make the effort worth it.

"This project will protect homes and property as well as add to the economy of our state and region," Guenther said.

LoBiondo on Monday also found out that Bush's budget proposal would cut about 500 National Guard positions in the state. The congressman said his office is still analyzing the proposal and whether it will affect the Air National Guard's 177th Fighter wing in Egg Harbor Township. But he cautioned that any proposal in the budget is still a long way from happening.

"President Bush's budget proposal is only the first step in the annual appropriations process," he said. "As Congress moves ahead in examining all federal programs, my staff and I will be closely reviewing the president's requests for programs critical to southern New Jersey, including funding for the Coast Guard and homeland defense."